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THE garden DIRT

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VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT written by Karen Gaspers, 2006-2007 BBG Education Docent.

Birmingham Botanic Gardens has been working for the past 10 years to bring nature and children together through its discovery field trips. Each fall, big yellow school buses roll up the drive and throw open their doors for dozens of excited school children. These children come to explore the gardens and learn how Native Americans flourished in the Alabama woods, to appreciate the genius of George Washington Carver, to marvel at how a small seed becomes a leafy plant, plus many other experiences.

This school year Birmingham Botanic Gardens scheduled field trips for more than 10,000 students. Most attend Birmingham City Schools, but any school that wants to attend is welcome, and enrollment from Jefferson County Schools has grown recently. The field trips are free and based on the Alabama State Course of Study – appealing to administrators and teachers.

Of course, the number of students to whom Birmingham Botanic Gardens can give this experience depends on one important factor: its volunteer docents. Docents work mainly in teams of two to lead children through the gardens. And while docents present curriculum-based programs filled with valuable learning objectives, it's not all scripted. Docents also provide the space for nature to unfold and work its magic

Robin Geurs, who became a docent two years ago, recalls a field trip in which she had the students stop and sit down once they were in the woods to listen and observe their surroundings. Suddenly, a red-tailed hawk swooped down, snatching for a squirrel, which squealed loudly. "We were amazed," she says. "The kids were just like, 'Wow, did you see that?'"

It's these types of experiences that make the field trips just as rewarding for the docents as for the students.

"I love seeing the kids, seeing their minds being opened to observing new things in nature," Geurs says.

But becoming a docent doesn't require a teaching degree or any special background.

Birmingham Botanic Gardens provides a top-notch curriculum, thorough training in that curriculum, and a supportive, resource-laden staff. Docents just need to be themselves.

"If you enjoy children, if you love nature and enjoy teaching and learning with a great group of people who want to give back to the community, it's a great intersection of these areas and is something worthwhile to consider," says Becky Hutto, who has been a docent for almost 10 years. "It's fun, it's stimulating, and rewarding to be outdoors with nature and with children."

To volunteer contact Karen Larsen, Volunteer Coordinator p 205.414.3962 or e-mail volunteers@bbgardens.org or www.bbgardens.org.